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ABSTRACT

The reading difficulty that black children encounter is not a result of language differences but rather a consequence of living in a society where people are socialized to view blacks as inferior and less able. Teachers are not immune to these attitudes. In addition to societal views, teachers are also influenced by social science research which has reinforced the notion that black children are inferior by describing them as disadvantaged, deprived, educationally handicapped, and verbally deficient. Social scientists have generated theories that reject the language and culture of these children, and teachers' attitudes and expectations tend to reflect these views. On the basis of a review of the research, it is suggested that teacher training programs, preservice and inservice, should emphasize helping teachers develop an understanding and an awareness of individual as well as cultural and linguistic differences. (Author/EB)

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LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES:
DO THEY INTERFERE WITH LEARNING TO READ?

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During the past fifteen years educators have focused their attention on the cultural differences in people and their effect on learning. In particular, educators have turned their attention to the effects of minority groups' dialects on language learning and reading. For a large majority of Black children, learning to read is a difficult task which is sometimes never achieved with any proficiency. This is ironic because we live in a society where children are constantly exposed to print through books, newspapers, and television. At a very early age, children learn that print has meaning; it represents the spoken word. They attach meaning to words on cans and boxes, on street signs, and on signs on buildings. Because of this early exposure it seems reasonable to assume that for most children, learning to read would be as natural as learning to talk. This is not the case for many Black children; consequently, many social scientists have attempted to examine, define, and analyze the factors that contribute to reading failure among Black children. It has been argued that language is a critical factor in the reading process and that many Black children speak a nonstandard form of English which causes a mismatch between their language and the printed page of the textbook. The purpose of this paper is to present a different point of view: The reading difficulty that Black

children encounter is not a result of language differences but rather a consequence of living in a society where people are socialized to view Blacks as inferior and less-able human beings. These attitudes are ingrained daily through books, newspapers, and other forms of mass media.

It is our belief that attitudes are crucial in determining whether children learn to read in school, and it is apparent that teachers are not immuned to the attitudes of this society. In addition to societal views, teachers are also influenced by social science research which has reinforced the notion that Black children are inferior by describing them as disadvantaged, deprived, educationally handicapped, and verbally deficient. Social scientists have generated theories which rejected the language and culture of these children. Teachers' attitudes and expectations tend to reflect these views as evidenced by Becker(1972), Clark(1964), Grottlieb(1964), and Washington(1977). Since language and reading are so critical to school success, we will review the research which examines the relationship between the language of Black children and their learning to read.

Review of the Literature

Following the desegregation of schools decision in the case of Brown vs. Board of Education 1954, educators began to focus their attention on a population of children who had been deliberately ignored by society prior to that time. Those children were Black children. As a result of pressure from the Black community

and Black service organizations, educators as well as other social scientists were forced to look at the quality of education that Black children were receiving in schools throughout the United States. Consequently, educators became concerned about the academic performance of these children and began to use standardized achievement measures to compare the academic performance of these children with the academic performance of children from the dominant culture. The results of these standardized measures indicated that a large majority of Black children were below the national norms in reading performance. Educators hypothesized that the environment of these children and their language were significant factors in determining intellectual development and academic achievement. Several theories were developed on the basis of these assumptions.

In 1961, Basil Bernstein found that middle class and lower class parents in England used different child-rearing techniques which resulted in different patterns of language and thought. On the basis of his research, Bernstein proposed that middle class children used an "elaborated code" of language which was adequate for describing feelings and intentions and elaborating reasons underlying decisions, whereas lower class children spoke a restricted code which could not communicate complex ideas and thoughts. He further concluded that this was a primitive code of speech which oriented children toward a primitive understanding of casual relations and toward concepts which were more descriptive than analytic. Furthermore, this

low level of conceptual functioning inhibited the children from learning from their environment.

Bernstein's theory was adapted to American education in the form of a theory of language deprivation sometimes referred to as the verbal-deficit hypothesis. The verbal-deficit hypothesis was based on the assumption that Black children in the inner-city and rural south lived in environments where they heard very little language and had poor language models; therefore, they learned a restricted code of language which was defective and inadequate for learning, subsequently causing academic failure. In accordance with this theory, numerous researchers proposed preschool language programs.

Martin Deutsch (1964) argued that the absence of a well-structured routine in the home was reflected in the difficulty that lower class children had in structuring language. Through observation, he deduced that lower class children's speech sequences seemed to be temporally very limited and poorly structured syntactically; therefore, the major goal of a language development program should be syntactic organization and subject continuity. Accordingly, he proposed a language training program which required the creation of a rich, individualized language environment where words were repeatedly placed in a meaningful context, and where children were allowed many opportunities for expressive language demonstrations.

Likewise, Bereiter and Englemann (1966) theorized that lower class children's language was deficient and the deficiency

affected their ability to conceptualize. In addition, they claimed that these children used a system of "giant words" or phrases which they could not take apart or recombine. The children allegedly did not understand that words could not be transformed into statements, questions, or comments. To remedy these deficiencies, Bereiter and Englemann constructed a preschool program which relied solely on pattern drill responses. The beginning program was based on two similar statement forms: "This is a _____" and "This_____ is _____". They reasoned that through these sentence forms children could learn to identify things in their world and learn how to ask questions.

These programs and others like them which were developed during the sixties (Klaus & Gray, 1968; Nimnicht, Meier, McAfee, 1969; and Weikart, 1967) supported one idea or mode of thought: Black children spoke a nonstandard dialect which was deficient and it was necessary to change their dialect from nonstandard to Standard English if they were to perform well in school. However, by the late sixties, linguists began to examine the theory of language deprivation and found that the nonstandard dialect that many inner-city children spoke could be defined as a systematic and viable means of communication which was syntactically and phonologicaaly different from, but not inferior to, Standard English.

The research of Labov (1965) was instrumental in altering the belief that Black children spoke a language which was inferior and deficient. He conducted extensive research studies in Harlem, New York, with a population of 300 males

between the ages of ten and seventeen. He and his associates interviewed these subjects individually and in groups inside and outside of the school. The found that the subjects responded differently to the interview depending on the setting. In school, a situation that Labov described as threatening, the speech of these subjects seemed inhibited and unnatural, whereas the language elicited from the same subjects outside of school was expressive, complex, and logical. From these interviews Labov proposed that the setting influenced the language patterns that Black children exhibited and that it was possible that much of the language that researchers had examined during the early sixties was elicited in threatening situations which caused the children not to speak freely. He further concluded that social situations influenced speech and that there was no monolithic form of Black dialect. Adults tended to show fewer forms of Black dialect than younger people, and middle class people showed fewer forms than lower class people. He also found that it was difficult to determine the number of people who spoke Black dialect because like other speakers of English, Black people's language varies according to geographic region, age, social class, and situation.

Labov and his associates administered a repetition test which tested whether nonstandard dialect speakers could imitate Standard English sentences. The results of the test showed that in many cases the subjects were capable of repeating sentences in Standard English. Even when the subjects could

not imitate, they could translate the Standard English sentence into their mode of speech indicating that they were able to comprehend the sentence. For example, "I asked Alvin if he knows how to play basketball" was transformed into "I ax Alvin do he know how to play basketball". This and other evidence showed that Black dialect speakers could generally understand Standard English patterns even when they could not and did not produce tham.

Consequently, linguists and educators began to examine the relationship between Black English and reading. Labov (1967) postulated that educators should be concerned with two forms of difficulty that Black children encounter in school: 1. structural conflicts, interference with learning ability stemming from a mismatch of linguistic structure; and 2. functional conflicts, interference stemming from a mismatch in the functions which standard and nonstandard English perform in a given culture. In this paper, we are primarily concerned with structual conflicts. Labov further concluded that there were structual conflicts: phonological and grammatical differences between Black English and Standard English. For example, Black English phonology does not distinguish the following sets of words in pronounciation:

pass=past=passed

miss=mist=missed

fine=find=fined

However, this does not indicate that there is no past tense represented in Black English because speakers of Black English

do form irregular past tense forms. For example, a speaker of Black English would use the sentence forms, I told him and He kept mine. Labov suggested that a possible solution to the problem would be to educate teachers to the linguistic differences in Black children's language so they could make the distinction between differences in pronounciation and mistakes in reading.

Shuy (1969) proposed that in addition to teacher training, special reading materials should be constructed which systematically avoided the mismatch between Black English and Standard English. Baratz (1970) agreed that the language of Black children was not verbally deficient but that it was "different". She contended that it was necessary to teach Black children Standard English in order to prevent academic failure because Standard English is a more prestigious form of English. Black children needed to know the language of the school if they were to perform well. She further argued that there was a mismatch between the children's language system and the Standard English textbook. In addition to phonological differences, she deduced that Black children were not familiar with the syntax of the traditional reading textbook. Accordingly, she proposed that Black children should be taught in their vernacular, Black English, and later taught to read Standard English. A program like this would not only require vernacular texts, but it would also require a series of transitional readers that would move the children from the vernacular textbook to a Standard English textbook.

Rystrom (1970) conducted a study which tested the following hypotheses: 1. Black children can be taught to use features of white speech which do not occur in their native dialect; 2. Knowledge of this additional dimension of dialect will have a positive and significant influence on reading scores; and 3. The use of a phoneme-grapheme controlled reader will have a positive and significant influence on word reading scores. The results of the study did not show a relationship between dialect and reading achievement. Rystrom replicated the study in Georgia with a few minor changes. Basically, he wanted to find out if dialect training would result in higher reading achievement scores. His data did not support the assumption that dialect training would modify the use of dialect by the subjects and significantly increase reading achievement scores.

Melmed (1970) investigated the relationship between Black dialect interference and reading. He concluded that there was a continuum of dialect variation used by Black children and that most of them comprehended Standard English in written form. Accordingly, he concluded that it was not necessary to teach Black children Standard English before teaching reading and that Standard English texts were adequate for teaching these children to read. However, his data did imply that Black English phonology seemed to cause difficulty when children were expected to read words in isolation or out of context.

Likewise, Simons and Johnson (1974) hypothesized that there was a mismatch between Black children's language and the textbook; therefore, Black children would be able to read dialect readers better than Standard English texts. Their data disclosed that second and third grade dialect-speaking children did not read dialect readers better than they read Standard English readers. There was no evidence of grammatical reading interference; consequently, the authors suggested that social scientists should look beyond dialect per se for a remedy to the problem of reading failure among Black children.

The theories about Black children's language which first developed were greatly influenced by societal attitudes rather than empirical evidence. The verbal deficit hypothesis which was the first theory proposed as a justification for reading failure among Black children reflected the white liberal attitudes that Americans were developing toward Blacks during the early sixties. This view assumed that Black children could learn if they could overcome their cultural background. Programs were developed which were supposed to help Black children change their language so that it would be more like Standard English. Some social scientists examined the issue of language and reading failure more objectively; consequently, they began to question the verbal-deficit hypothesis. A theory of cultural difference was developed which accepted Black dialect as a language system different from but not equal to Standard English. Programs were proposed which suggested that Black children learn Standard English

because of its social value and that special materials should be designed that use the children's dialect. Both the verbal-deficit hypothesis and the culturally different hypothesis focused on the language of Black children as the primary cause of reading failure; however, the research data do not support these assumptions. There is considerable evidence which supports the idea that Black children's language cannot be changed through repetition or pattern drill exercises and that they do not read dialect readers better than Standard English texts.

We are now looking beyond dialect per se as the cause of reading failure among Black children. Educators and linguists who are attempting to do this have argued that it is not the Black children's language that interferes with reading but it is teacher's reactions to that language that causes the difficulty. They have further argued that no spoken dialect corresponds exactly to Standard English but that some forms are more prestigious than others. Accordingly, a teacher might preceive a nonstandard dialect as less prestigious and unacceptable which could cause interference during reading instruction. The problem is one of attitudes.

Goodman and Burke (1973) concluded after ten years of working with nonstandard dialect speakers in a reading situation that "the only special disadvantage that speakers of low-status dialects suffer in learning to read is one imposed by teachers and schools. Rejection of their dialects and educators' confusion

of linguistic difference with linguistic deficiency interferes with the natural process by which reading is acquired and undermines the linguistic self-confidence of divergent speakers. Simply speaking, the disadvantage of the divergent speaker, Black or white, comes from linguistic discrimination" (p. 7).

Other educators have investigated the attitudes of teachers by using questionaires and recording how they respond to questions related to dialect-specific miscues. Rystrom and Cowart (1972) tested whether the race of the teacher influenced the decoding scores of Black students. Two teachers, one Black and one white were asked to administer the Dolch Basic Sight Word Test to a second grade class. The data indicated that the race of the tester had a significant effect upon the decoding scores of the students. Black students who were evaluated by the white teacher read fewer words correctly than students who were interviewed by Black teachers. The authors concluded that white teachers have to learn to tune-in to Black speech. First, they must accept Black English as a viable dialect and then they must learn which features occur in the student's speech but not in their own. They must eliminate their own linguistic biases, then they might find that many of the problems that they encounter when teaching Black children would disappear.

Likewise, Cunningham (1977) investigated teacher attitudes toward non-meaning-changing miscues to see if their attitudes were different toward Black-dialect-specific miscues and non-dialect-specific miscues. She gave 214 teachers who were enrolled

at four state universities in different geographical regions of the country a twenty-item miscue attitude questionaire to complete. Nine items were non-dialect-specific miscues and nine were Black-dialect-specific miscues. In addition, the teachers were also asked to complete a Black dialect Recognition Questionaire. Her findings indicated that in each of the four regions, teachers would correct significantly more Black-dialect-specific miscues.

Considering the controversial research related to reading interference and Black dialect, Ann McCormick Piestrup (1973) undertook an extensive exploratory study which examined the manner in which first grade teachers responded to Black children's use of dialect during reading instruction. Two investigators observed and tape-recorded reading instruction in fourteen predominately Black classrooms. After examining the observations, Piestrup was able to identify and describe six teaching styles. They were the Vocabulary Approach, the Decoding Approach, the Standard Pronounciation Approach, the Interrupting Approach, the White Liberal Approach, and the Black Artful Approach. We will briefly examine the teaching styles. The Standard Pronounciation Approach and the Interrupting Approach are the two teaching styles that we are least concerned with because it seems as if the teachers who used those methods did not have any idea of how to teach reading to Black children. It is obvious to us that it is a waste of time to attempt to teach Standard English to nonstandard dialect speakers because they have a viable language system of their own. In addition, it is not

necessary to speak Standard English in order to read it. The Interrupting teachers did not seem aware of dialect differences and they did not appear to be interested in teaching children to read. Their attitude was one of intolerance and impatience which does not have any place in a classroom with children. It is our belief that teachers who have these attitudes need additional training in teaching and child development or a different profession.

On the other hand, the Decoding Emphasis Approach and the Vocabulary Emphasis Approach were both based on the notion that reading is an exact process; therefore, children must progress through a sequence of skills in order to move to the next level. The skills are hierarchical, beginning with letters, words, and sentences. Once skills related to these elements were mastered, then the teacher focused on comprehension. Children learned to match their speech to the printed page rather than attempting to understand that the print on the page was supposed to have meaning. Teachers who teach children to read in this manner expect children to read orally word for word which causes interference and difficulty for dialect speakers. Consequently, Black children often become alienated from the reading process.

The last two approaches which we will discuss are the White Liberal Approach and the Black Artful Approach. According to Piestrup (1973) the children in classrooms where teachers used the Black Artful Approach had significantly higher scores in reading than children in the other classes. The score in reading

could be attributed to the teachers' use of rhythmic play in instruction and their acceptance of the children's language. They were also determined that the children would learn to read. The teachers in the White Liberal Group used a method similar to the one used by the Black Artful teachers but their children had lower reading scores. Piestrup suggested that the difference resulted because the White Liberal Teachers were more interested in developing rapport with the children than teaching reading. We do not believe that this is the reason for the difference. It is our belief that the difference resulted because the White Liberal teachers were more concerned with teaching reading than teaching the isolated skills that they needed in order to perform well on achievement tests. The Black Artful teachers were concerned with both issues and they realized that if children, primarily Black children were going to survive in school they needed to perform well on tests in addition to learning to read. A major flaw in Piestrups's study was that reading ability was measured on the basis of performance on tests. We do not believe that standardized tests can measure reading performance because they are constructed on the assumption that reading is an exact process. Contradictory to that view, the Black Artful and the White Liberal Approaches seemed to view reading as a language process. The goal was to help children understand that the purpose of reading was communication between the author and the reader. Comprehension was the focal point. Both groups of teachers accepted the fact that when children enter school they have a knowledge of language,

a cognitive structure (theory of the world), and a background of experiences. The teacher used this knowledge to implement a program of reading instruction which focused on the language patterns of children and their experiences. The children were encouraged to express their ideas orally and to use their language freely. The teachers also used materials which reflected the children's experiential background. We also suggest that the teachers' interactions were critical factors in the reading process as indicated by Piestrup when she described the interactions in the classrooms of the White Liberal Teachers and the Black Artful Teachers (pp. 97-114). In all of the episodes, the children responded eagerly, freely using their dialect.

Summary and Conclusion

Considering the research on Black children's language and reading we can draw several conclusions. The verbal-deficit hypothesis and the language difference hypothesis cannot provide an explanation for the problem of reading failure among Black children. Both of these theories view reading as an exact process for reading to occur children's speech must match the printed page in a one to one relationship. This is implied in the solutions that they proposed, teaching Standard English prior to reading instruction and designing special materials written in the children's dialect. However, those solutions did not work, Black children did not learn Standard English and they did not read dialect readers better than Standard English texts. It is apparent that those solutions did not work because Black children have a

rule-governed language system which is adequate for learning to read. It is not necessary for children's speech to match the printed page exactly because reading is not an exact process. "It is a selective process. It involves partial use of minimal language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tenative, desisions are made to be confirmed, rejected, or refined as reading progresses (Goodman, 1972). It is not necessary for children's speech to match the printed text exactly. In adopting this view of the reading process we had to consider other factors which could contribute to reading failure among Black children. The teacher was the most obvious factor. The interactions that the teacher engages in with the children during oral reading and reading instruction determines whether or not they will be alienated from learning to read. It is likely that Black children will become alienated because teachers usually view the language of Black children as less prestigious; therefore, they often correct miscues which are dialect-specific and do not change meaning. This is shown in the manner inwhich teachers respond to Black children during reading instruction. Piestrup (1973) describes several episodes in her study. In the first episode a child (C1) was asked to read the sentences, <u>They call, "What is it?""What is it?"</u>

C1 Dey....

T Get your finger out of your mouth.

C1 call....

T Start again.

C1 Dey call, what is it? What is it?

T (asks a second child)

C2 Dey.

C1 Dat.

T What is it?

C2 Dat.

C3 Dey.

C4 (laughing)

C1 Dey

T Look at my tongue. (between teeth)

C1 They.

T That's right. Say it again.

C2 They.

T They. OK. Pretty good. OK, Jimmy.

In this episode the teacher shows that she does not understand the difference between teaching reading and changing children's speech. Most of the reading instruction involved changing the children's dialect instead of teaching reading. The child was able to read the sentence from the beginning but by the end of the interactions with the teacher the child was probably confused about reading. It was also clear that the other children in the group did not understand why the teacher corrected child 1.

In the second episode, Piestrup points out further problems.

T Who can give me a sentence with "win"?

C1 A boy win a race.

T A boy win a race?

C2 I know teacher.

C3 I know teacher.

T Hm, that sounds

C4 Teacher, I know one

T ...Can you say that a little better, so it sounds- I understand what you mean, but Ernadlyn, what, how would you say that?

C5 The win blew the hat off my frien' head.

This is another example of the teacher's ignorance of Black dialect. Since win and wind are homophones in Black dialect, the question is ambiguous. A sentence using either one would be correct. In addition, the children did not understand why the sentence was incorrect.

On the basis of this research, we would suggest that teacher training programs, preservice and inservice, should emphasize helping teachers develop an understanding and an awareness of individual as well as cultural and linguistic differences. In regard to reading, teachers must begin to see reading as a means of communication between the reader and the author of the text and to believe that children learn to read by reading. Reading instruction should focus on reading rather than changing children's dialects or engaging in activities which focus on sound-letter correspondence and recognition of words in

isolation. In place of this we propose that children should be exposed to print in books, on posters, and everywhere. They should have an opportunity to read books and stories which are written in the language patterns of children and which reflect the experiential and cultural diversity of this society. should also have the opportunity to write stories, poems, and plays.

The difference between teaching Black children to read and teaching white children to read is one of attitude. Most Black children have to prove that they are capable of learning to read. Teachers are informed through social science research that Black children are nonverbal and speak a dialect of English which is nonstandard and causes a mismatch between the printed page and the child's speech. Based on this information they assume that Black children will have difficulty learning to read. However, this is not the case. Reading is not an exact process; therefore it is not necessary for children's speech to match the printed page exactly. Reading is a language process and the goal of reading is communication between the author and the reader. A view of reading which focuses on communication accepts the language of children therefore diminishing the interference that nonstandard dialect speakers face during oral reading and reading instruction. According to this view teachers must be aware of and sensitive to language differences as well as individual differences in children. Most teachers are not aware of individual differences in children and many are not interested in becoming

aware. The attitudes that many teachers have toward teaching children to read have very little to do with what they know about children and their language development. The attitudes are based on societal views and on their experiences with learning to read. It is difficult for teachers to look beyond their own experiences in school so that they can learn more effective methods of teaching reading and become more effective teachers of culturally different children. This is probably the reason that Black children will continue to experience reading failure in schools.

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